



# Angry, frustrated, and overwhelmed: The emotional experience of consuming news about President Trump

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## Abstract

The emotional experience of consuming news about politics has been traditionally understudied. We aim to contribute to filling this void through a study of the emotional responses related to encountering stories about a high-profile political topic: the first 10 months of the administration of the US President, Donald Trump. To understand this, we draw upon 71 semi-structured interviews conducted in the greater metropolitan areas of Chicago, Miami and Philadelphia between January and October 2017. Our analysis indicates that: talking about political news often was a synonym of talking about President Trump; people expressed a high level of emotionality when recalling these experiences, which were more intense on social media and among those for whom the news felt more personal; feelings of anger or distress were often tied to wanting to increase political engagement; and individuals frequently develop mechanisms to cope with high levels of emotionality.

## Keywords

Emotions, journalism, news consumption, political communication, social media

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To Finn (29 years), an activist in a Philadelphia nonprofit, ‘political events and how it’s being shared in social media . . . can feel like a lot of emotional weight’. This echoes the experience of Kendra (35 years), a social services worker in a Chicago suburb who identifies as liberal: ‘it’s hard [to consume news] for me. I don’t like Donald Trump’. Emotions are strong for Sandra (51 years), a homemaker in the greater Miami area and a Trump supporter, too: ‘what they are showing [on CNN] I think it’s so wrong that it makes me feel very angry . . . that some people actually believe that’.

The statements from Finn, Kendra, and Sandra resonate with the salience and intensity of the emotional responses to news about politics during the Trump administration among many of the 71 people we interviewed in the greater Chicago, Miami, and Philadelphia areas between January and October 2017. This salience and intensity contrasts with the comparatively lesser attention that understanding the emotionality of consuming news about politics has received in scholarship in political communication, public opinion research, and journalism studies. Recent work in political communication and public opinion research has examined the role of emotions during information processing (Gross and Brewer, 2007; Hasell and Weeks, 2016; Igartua et al., 2011). Despite their valuable contributions, these studies have not explored emotionality in news consumption from a user’s perspective. Some recent work in journalism studies has made important inroads in this direction (Kormelink and Meijer, 2017; Martin, 2008; Peters, 2011), but without a specific focus on political news. We combine insights from these two strands of research to inquire into the emotional experience of appropriating news about a highly visible political topic – the first 10 months of the Trump presidency. As Madianou (2009) has argued, people’s engagement with the news is an affective process, which still remains understudied. In a context of rising of populism and high polarization, understanding how audiences engage with reading news about the polity is essential to understand ways that citizenship is contemporarily enacted. We ask the following: how are individuals emotionally relating to the consumption of news about politics, and making sense of those emotions, in the current political scenario?

Our analysis of the aforementioned interviews shows that: talking about political news often was a synonym of talking about President Trump; people expressed a high level of emotionality when recalling these experiences, which were more intense on social media and among those for whom the news felt more personal; feelings of anger or distress were often tied to wanting to increase political engagement; and individuals frequently developed mechanisms to cope with high levels of emotionality. We elaborate on the implications of these findings for scholarship aiming to understand political news consumption during a populist period marked by the rise of social media, polarization, and identity shifts.

## **Conceptual matters**

In the tradition of liberal democratic Western thought, the expectations of participation in politics have been shaped by ideals of a rational, objective, and dispassionate citizenship which have traditionally excluded the importance of emotional engagement with politics (Marcus et al., 2000; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a, 2019). While scholars have paid special attention to the role of news consumption in democratic life (Cappella and Jamieson,

1997; Dahlgren, 2009; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Putnam, 2000) there has been comparatively less attention paid to the role of emotions in these processes (Brader et al., 2011; Richards, 2004). However, an ‘affective turn’ in the humanities and the social sciences (Clough and Halley, 2007; Richards, 2004) has resulted in a recent increase of interest about the role of emotions in relationship to politics and news.

In the realm of political communication and public opinion, a stream of this work has concentrated on how emotions affect information processing, with a partial focus on news consumption, in at least four different ways. First, some studies have examined emotionality as a feature of content accessed by people (Bas and Grabe, 2015; Brader, 2005; Fujioka, 2016; Ryffel et al., 2014; Trepte et al., 2016; Uribe and Gunter, 2007). A second stream of research has looked at emotions as an outcome of exposure to news or other media content (Gross and Brewer, 2007; Igartua et al., 2011; Otieno et al., 2013; Scheufele, 1999; Wise et al., 2009). Third, there have been accounts inquiring into how emotions function as mediators in causal chains that typically feature exposure to news and media content as independent variables (Feinholdt et al., 2017; Hasell and Weeks, 2016; Lecheler et al., 2013, 2015; Miller, 2007; Seate and Mastro, 2017; Valentino et al., 2008). Finally, some scholars have looked at emotions primarily as causes explaining variance in attitudes, behavior, or policy preferences (Kim and Cameron, 2011; Nabi, 2003). Occasionally, some studies have combined more than one of these foci. Most of these studies have utilized experimental methods, which have been useful in illuminating causal dynamics. However, the artificiality of the settings and the understanding of emotions as discrete constructs have sometimes made it difficult to account for the complex contributions of the emotional dimension to sense-making processes. Moreover, the focus on the individual has prevented scholarship from making larger claims about broader collective and political contexts (Boehner et al., 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a).

While journalism and emotion have not always been explored together, due to journalism’s historical embrace of ideals of objectivity and rationality (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016), journalism studies have also seen a rise in interest regarding the connection between emotion and interpretation in the uptake of news (Beckett and Deuze, 2016). As Madianou (2009) has argued, ‘people’s engagement with the news emerges as an affective process that remains to be fully understood’ (p. 334). Recent work has conceived emotionality as an increasing aspect of journalism itself (Chong, 2019; Duncan, 2012), and Peters (2011) has argued that it has always been part of journalism. Papacharissi (2015) has proposed that affective news, signaled by a more opinionated style and filled with subjectivity, are increasingly salient in news practices. With a focus on how the contemporary news media construct, manage, and disseminate emotions, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013b) has argued that some forms of articulations of emotions in journalistic discourse can be conducive to building citizenship and community (Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). This research has suggested that although many times what are usually conceived as ‘negative’ emotions – like anger or anxiety – help to build the categories of otherness, their experience can also actually lead to active citizenship participation, engagement with the polity, and social activism (Gould, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Wood, 2015).

Other scholarly work at the intersection of journalism and emotion has focused on challenging from an audience perspective normative expectations around news

consumption in liberal democracies, which have been traditionally present in political communication and public opinion scholarship. Woodstock (2014) examined the emotional reactions of people who purposively avoid news exposure and concluded that this can contribute to democratic participation: avoiding the news enabled them to acquire a sense of calm, purpose, and constructive stance. Structural factors, such as race and gender, have also been shown to elicit responses of both news engagement and avoidance (Martin, 2008). Kormelink and Meijer (2017) found that affective considerations influence clicking patterns on news sites. As Beckett and Deuze (2016) have argued, despite the notion that people consume news mainly because it is useful or informative, ‘the consumer is acting in an emotionally charged way in connection with their community or wider networks’ (p. 3).

Emotionality in politics and news has been further complicated by a rise of populism in various parts of the world. According to Laclau (2005), populism is best understood as a mode of articulation, and therefore does not have a necessary correspondence with ideology (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). From this perspective, populist leaders seek to erase traditional channels of representative democracies, such as the traditional news media. Therefore, they construct their ways of surpassing intermediaries and communicating directly with ‘the people’ (Schmitter, 2006), and creating a logic of *us* and *them* (Waisbord, 2014). Along this vein, Cows and Schroeder (2018) have recently argued that Trump’s populism has benefited in this sense from the use of Twitter (Cows and Schroeder, 2018), a point also underscored by Turner (2018). In her analysis of the emotionality of Trump’s rhetoric, Wahl-Jorgensen (2018b) argues that he has ‘ushered an emotional regime of anger’ (p. 79). This resonates with her concept of ‘angry populism’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018a, 2019), which refers to a characteristic of recent right-wing populist movements that build exclusionary solidarities.

The liberal democratic imagination, and its influence in political communication and journalism, has led to the following conundrum: ‘If emotions are inevitable but preclude the rational citizenship required by its ideal, how can citizenship be possible?’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a: 9). We address this matter by examining how people enact contemporary practices of citizenship through the expression and interpretation of emotions that arise from their engagement with news about the polity. We build on political communication and public opinion scholarship to examine the consumption of political news, and we combine this by drawing upon reception studies in journalism to address the experiential dimension of this type of news. We pursue this goal by examining the emotional dimension of one particular case: how audiences engaged with stories about the US President Donald Trump during the first 10 months of the administration. We inquire about what emotions are most prevalent in people’s discourse about their experiences consuming news, the role of media type in those experiences, and the strategies audiences adopted to cope with the emotionality tied to a perceived polarized media ecosystem.

## Methodology

This article is based on 71 semi-structured interviews with adults conducted in the greater Chicago, Miami, and Philadelphia areas. These cities represent three different social,

cultural, and political orientations, and are located in three regions of the United States. Interviews were conducted to learn about the participants' own perspectives on their experience, gain insight into how they interpret and conceptualize it, and retrieve situations unavailable for direct observation, altogether providing a window into their lived experience (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Following Wengraf (2001), to

analyze a person's told story, we address not so much the events and actions . . . but rather the way in which those events and actions were experienced and are now understood from the perspective of the person giving the interview. (p. 239)

Thus, we analyze the retrieval of the emotional experience of news consumption based on participants' discourse.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the authors and two research assistants from January to October 2017. Interviewees were recruited using an opportunistic, purposive snowball sampling technique (Miles et al., 2014). To avoid having 'homogeneous samples' of 'people with similar demographic or social characteristics' (Miles et al., 2014: 47), we tried to recruit diverse participants in terms of location, gender, race, ethnicity, occupation, and ideology.

Participants were not compensated for their time and were invited to choose a place of their convenience for the interview. On average, interviews lasted 45 minutes. After obtaining their verbal consent to participate in the study, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in their entirety. When statements from the interviews are quoted, they are attributed to a pseudonym to protect interviewees' privacy. The average age was 41 years old, with a range from 18 to 80 years old. Thirty-four percent of the participants identified as male, and the rest as female, with the exception of one participant who identified as transgender. In terms of their highest level of education obtained, half of the participants had a graduate degree, 30 percent an undergraduate degree, 15 percent a high-school degree, and the remaining did not report it. According to Spradley (1979), ethnography 'should flow from the concepts and meanings native to that scene rather than the concepts developed by the ethnographer' (p. 24). Therefore, to avoid 'fit[ting] the culture into analytical categories' (p. 23) imposed by the interviewer, ones that could bias participants' representation of their own experiences, participants were not asked to share identity-related variables. We have this information only when they shared it. Of those who self-identified their race and/or ethnicity, 41 percent did so as White, 29 percent as Latinxs, 11 percent as Black, 11 percent as Asian, and one identified as Native American.<sup>1</sup> From those who talked about their religious beliefs, our sample included Christian, Jewish, and Muslim people. The occupational spectrum included employees, students, retired professionals, teachers, bankers, lawyers, and housewives, among others. Our analysis shows that either there were more liberals than conservatives or that the former felt more comfortable sharing their ideological stance.

The analysis followed a grounded theory sequence of open, axial, and selective coding prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), until reaching theoretical saturation. Initially, the authors read the transcripts and coded individually searching for recurring themes. Later, they contrasted the emerging categories. The analysis searched for

meaning as it appeared in participants' discourse, to understand subjectivity through the 'terms used by the social actors themselves' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 220). We conceive of emotions as a conscious, transmissible interpretation of feelings (Massumi, 2002; Shouse, 2005), which exist within the larger realm of affect (Papacharissi, 2015), and take place collectively and within social relations (Boehner et al., 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a). Whenever we refer to 'positive' and 'negative' emotions, we do so from an emic perspective – without prejudging whether they are good or bad – to convey how interviewees expressed their emotional experience, while acknowledging that its valence is not dichotomous (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 11).

## Findings

We divide the presentation of the findings into three sub-sections. The first describes the more salient emotional responses to reading news about politics, which have a focus on stories about President Trump. The second focuses on the role of media type on different emotional experiences. The third addresses how audiences cope with high levels of negative emotionality.

### *Emotional responses to reading the news*

*Inundation of news about Trump.* All participants indicated having some type of news consumption. When they were asked about their most recent news consumption situation, stories about President Donald Trump were usually discussed. 'Obviously it was all about Trump, because it always is', said Emily (32 years), a reporter. Linda (59 years), a yoga instructor, noted something similar: 'it's been a lot of Trump on the national front'. Some interviewees referred to feeling over-exposed to this topic, like Frances (68 years), a retired Professor: 'now after the election we're still being inundated'. Similarly, Justin (32 years), a lawyer, expressed that 'There's this obsession about what's going on in Washington'. For some, this 'inundation' became unmanageable at times. 'There is just such an inundation of content . . . I don't know how to break through the noise of what people are getting all the time', said Dinesh (23 years), a graduate student.

*Attachment to political news.* Attachment to the news was high among many interviewees: 'I've been following the Trump presidency as closely as I can', noted Elissa (34 years), a policy analyst. Along these lines, Leroy, a retired public-sector employee, said 'I cannot help but express it: every morning I want to find out what stupid thing [the President] has said or done today!' Graciela (74 years), who is retired, also expressed an experience of attachment to following news about Trump and said that despite 'hat[ing] Trump, I need to be informed about him all day'. When asked about the news stories she had spent most time on, Martha (69 years), a Professor, confessed that 'I have become something of a news junkie on the latest stuff out of Washington so whatever it is that's being written about the President'. Javier (29 years), an attorney, shared a shortcoming between his intention to avoid stories about the President and his ability to do so: 'I don't follow Trump, I can't do it, though I find myself reading a lot about what he posts anyway'.

*Predominance of negative feelings.* In terms of the range of emotional states, most participants reported predominantly negative feelings, in particular anger, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed as part of their experience of consuming news. Some interviewees manifested anger recalling reading news about Trump. David (36 years), a market researcher, confessed that lately he feels ‘more pissed off than [he’d] like to be’ consuming news about the President. Alan (28 years), an attorney, concurred by commenting that after the election ‘[the news] is very infuriating to read’. When asked about his latest instance of news consumption, Leroy (80 years) expressed that it was about ‘that two-week juvenile that we have for president’. He added: ‘Sometimes I just get so disgusted with it [the news] that I don’t even want to know much more about it. But I am interested in all those other things that are impacted by what he does’. Leroy, who declared to have increased his community activism after the election, exemplified a pattern that others (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Woodstock, 2014) have seen in the past: news avoidance or rejection is not necessarily tied to a lack of interest or concern about the polity.

The experience of reading stories about politics made some interviewees feel anxious about news. Debra (50 years) said that in the past she ‘didn’t feel like I had to listen to [the news] all the time, 24/7 because you didn’t think at any time, “oh my God some crazy thing is going to happen”’. Nevertheless, ‘now you feel like every day there’s a new decision and a new statement and a new issue that you need to know about’. Martha (69 years) concurred: ‘it’s a very unusual presidency and we have to follow what’s happening. We’re surprised every day and it’s almost like what’s the latest bomb shell . . . it’s troubling’. Many, like Mike (24 years), a brand associate, and Paul (63 years), a retired bank employee, described consuming news as ‘frustrating’. Sometimes this frustration was tied to a sense of dissatisfaction regarding current events. Susana (51 years), owner of a family business, stated, ‘it’s a moment [of a] little bit of frustration, in general, and also skepticism’.

To others, the experience of news consumption felt overwhelming. Rose (76 years), a retired physician, said that reading the news ‘is upsetting enough that I don’t stay with it very long’. Similarly, Susana noted that she is interested in knowing what is going on, but ‘you get to a point in which it is just too much’. Reading the news during the election became ‘too much to handle’, said Seojun (29 years). Karen (53 years), a teacher, also associated her overwhelm with the election. She expressed that she felt very ‘upset’ after a series of ‘hate crimes following the election’, so she ‘reposted a lot of stuff [on Facebook] but . . . It got very consuming . . . It was overwhelming’.

*The personal is emotionally political.* Whenever the political issues that were being expressed by the interviewees felt more personal to them – either because of their own activism or profession, issues of identity, and/or because of how politics affect them directly – this was connected with a more emotional recalling of their news experiences. Leroy (80 years), who identifies as a community organizer and a social justice activist, mentioned four news stories – such as the burning of a church, or the rise of the Ku Klux Klan – that he related to the rise of Trump, adding that ‘if a bully were not there, this would not be going on’. He expressed feeling ‘anxieties’ and being ‘frustrated’, and that at the same time his news consumption ‘has accelerated since the beginning of the campaign’. Debra, a community activist in her 50s, referred to how she felt when reading a

news story about President Trump and anti-Semitism: 'It made me angry because I just want to say, "wake up, you, idiot!"'. Kendra (35 years), a social services worker, talked about Trump's changes in immigration policies as follows: 'I thought it was absolutely terrible and fundamentally racist . . . I'm feeling really sad, but also very angry'. Belén (19 years), who was born in Mexico, where part of her family lives, said that '[the last thing I read was] all about Trump and Mexico, everything about the wall. I shared everything [on Facebook]'. Others were also concerned and struggled with reading about this news topic. José, an immigrant metallurgic worker in South Florida, commented that he finds it hard to watch the news and that is 'all day the same things about Trump, so that's been hard to me, with everything they talk about immigration'. Beatriz (72 years), said that she is 'afraid to see happening the same thing that happened in Argentina [her home country] forty years ago [referring to the 1976 *coup d'état*]. I'm scared for my daughter, for my granddaughter . . . This man [Trump] is very destructive'. Finn (29 years), who identifies as transgender and works on LGBTQ advocacy and training, expressed that 'it's been a pretty general sentiment at least amongst my friends that the news that's being shared feels like really heavy. And it's sort of like an emotional limit'. He referred to the coverage of certain political events and added that 'it can feel like a lot of emotional weight without feeling like you are giving anything back to that, so I try to focus on the news that lead to the type of action stuff'. Feminist scholarship has talked about the relationship between emotions and structures of oppression, especially those related to the life of the feminist, or the activist. Ahmed (2017) has argued that 'to be involved in political activism is thus to be involved in a struggle against happiness' (p. 255), since the latter is a construct used to justify social norms. We observe that among those participants whose activity, identity, and/or activism made politics feel more personal, a heightened level of emotionality was displayed, but this did not refrain them from participation and engagement with politics.

There were also differences in emotional experience related to ideological identities: while liberals were more often angry and frustrated about politics *per se*, especially about the President, conservatives were more frequently upset about the political coverage by mainstream media in general, and of the President in particular. On the one hand, Barbara (80 years), a retired social worker who identified as liberal, said that she is really worried about foreign policy changes: 'Some of [Trump's] foreign policy I kind of cringe at . . . I just am fearful . . . Very troubling'. On the other hand, Sandra (51 years) did not appreciate how CNN portrayed the President and believed that occurred because 'it is the first time that there is a candidate that is more complex and that people see as controversial'. Nevertheless, she considered that the critiques about the President to be personal and therefore dismissible: 'I see beyond whether I like how he talks or what he says . . . And I don't feel personally attacked. As opposed to people who say "as a woman I feel offended", I don't! Or as a minority, either!' After further expressing her anger at the media, she said: 'I feel I'm living a reality and [the media] are living in another one'. Other conservative interviewees also felt upset at how liberal media represented the political situation. 'You watch CNN and they are like "everything is a disaster, everything he [Trump] is doing is wrong" . . . it makes me angry', commented Mónica (39 years). David (18 years), also a Trump supporter, was upset at the media coverage of a President's speech and found 'it unbelievable how the media can talk about such stupid

things for so long'. Reactions of high negative emotionality from participants in different positions of the ideological spectrum signal the logic of 'angry populism' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018a) during the Trump administration.

### *Emotions and the news in social media platforms*

*Social media as a gateway to news.* Almost all interviewees stated consuming news on social media. Linda said that 'online most of what I read comes directed to me via Facebook'. She added, 'one of the best things about Facebook is that other people are screening the news for you'. George (50 years), who works at a library, said that Facebook is his 'entry point' for news. April (32 years), a project administrator, said that 'I don't go out there [social media] searching for it [news], but I kind of go through [Yahoo and Facebook]'. Deborah (33 years), an organization administrator, relatedly noted that social media helps her get an idea about stories she may not seek herself, and that although she does not 'share news about this president . . . I do see some of that stuff on Facebook and I generally get an idea of it rather than actually watching the primary source myself'. Others also relied on social media for news, but were uncomfortable with this behavior. 'It's a little embarrassing . . . but yeah, almost all of it [news consumption]' came from social media, said Darlene (45 years), owner of a small business. Likewise, Priya confessed that 'I hate saying that but yeah, I do get a lot of articles that I read from Facebook'.

For many interviewees, the intensity of emotional states was greater when they consumed news on social media than via the news media. One reason why social media was more emotionally taxing was due to the centrality of its personal component. Matthew (33 years), a paralegal worker, commented that after the election he reduced his political commentary on Facebook and Instagram, because discussions about politics on these platforms got 'a little too toxic for me . . . I always have a couple of people who want to . . . play devil's advocate or spark a fire'. At times, this became so upsetting that he unfriended a few Facebook contacts. To Finn, after the election, 'Facebook sometimes feels a little bit overwhelming'. Kendra expressed that during the election her social media feeds became 'too much to handle . . . I was just deleting people'. Matthew noted that he lost followers during the election: 'I think some of the images I shared of Trump, people got bothered'.

*Distress around cross-ideological exposure.* The emotional intensity experienced when reading and sharing news on social media was tied to an overall feeling of being distressed about exposure to cross-ideological content shared by acquaintances, and sometimes reading or participating in discussions. Elissa's husband is Democrat, but she is not. She started to avoid sharing political news on social media to elude conflict: 'If I had all friends who agree with me it would be a lot easier'. Alida (34 years), owner of a digital market agency, explained that she refrains from posting about politics because it is very 'annoying' to witness 'when my super liberal friends, which I have, and then my super conservative friends, which I also have . . . go back and forth on my Facebook [wall]'. Kevin (35 years), a teacher, mentioned that he had unsuccessfully tried to intervene in a similar situation: 'I said to [a female friend], "Look, you're just

not going to change [my uncle's] point of view". And you know, I think she eventually unfollowed [me]".

### *Coping with emotional negativity*

*Hearing the other side.* Despite the distress of being exposed to news content that counters their views, many interviewees also shared a discomfort upon realizing, especially after the 2016 election results, that they had been in an information 'bubble'. In their own accounts, this led them to a willingness to know more about 'the other side', even when this had upsetting emotional correlates. Abigail (25 years), a teacher, said that 'all of the news sources that I read said that Clinton was gonna win. And they were super wrong about it, so I felt I was living in an echo chamber'. She added that maybe she was 'reading what I wanted to hear instead knowing what was actually going on', and decided to start 'looking at Fox news once a week, because even if it makes me angry I want to know what half the country is reading'. Alida also referred to wanting to learn about other people's points of view: 'I am definitely more of a conservative person . . . I want to kind of feel and understand where other people are coming from'. Koltan (33 years), an algorithmic trader, said that he watches news that counter his beliefs because he is curious about 'where they're coming from and get an understanding of that viewpoint'. Amy (44 years), a translator, said that she tried to do the same 'but I have a hard time watching like Fox News or different outlets'. Similarly, Priya (47 years) explained: 'my blood pressure gets really high . . . But then I realize that is what other people are listening to, and it is important that I hear that because if I don't hear it, then I live in my little bubble'.

*Self-preservation.* Given this scenario, some interviewees espoused a narrative of emotional self-preservation, which was tied to being more selective about news content and practices. Although they tried to behave consonantly with their desire of being good citizens, they were also attentive to their emotional well-being. Thus, psychological self-preservation sometimes moderated their news intake. 'I'm just reading what I want to read and what makes me feel good about it . . . This wound [the election result] is still painful to me', confessed Fiona (50 years) a librarian. Similarly, Crystal (36 years), an employee at a nonprofit, shared that she is not happy with the election result but 'still want[s] to know what's going on' although she 'can't stand watching it for too long'. These strategies sometimes were tied to contradictory feelings. Lisa (56 years), a market researcher, commented, 'I want to keep an eye on [Trump's activity on Twitter], but I don't know if I can stand it'. In this scenario, some participants were more drastic and decided to withdraw temporarily from news consumption. 'I think I'm taking like a slight media sabbatical just because it's been like so heavy with what Trump is doing', commented Nicole (32 years), an advertising analyst. However, to others avoiding news about Trump was difficult due to the high levels of attachment mentioned above. Interviewees like Dinesh found creative ways of relieving themselves from the distress of content that was difficult to read on social media by combining strategies of self-preservation while being able to monitor dissonant views: 'I unfollow [people] and then I put them on a list of friends and then every now and then I go on there and I watch the political conversations that they're having so I can remain abreast of that'. Our findings

suggest that avoiding or regulating news consumption was more prevalent across those individuals who indicated not supporting the administration.

*Civic duty.* The dominance of negative feelings was in some cases tempered by positive affect tied to the fulfillment of their sense of civic duty. 'I enjoy knowing what's going on and I think it's part of being a voter', said Abigail. Other interviewees emphasized the value of not feeling isolated. Elizabeth (30 years), a consultant, shared that: 'part of my motivation to keep reading the news is because people around you are reading the news'. As Fiona noted, her 'motivation for clicking on stories these days is actually to make me feel better and to remind me that there are people that agree with me'. Susan (47 years), who works in public relations, commented that being 'an informed person makes your life more enriched and enables you to have more thoughtful discussions with the people that you surround yourself'. Hanna (23 years), a receptionist, also gave social reasons to explain her news habits: 'I don't feel social pressure to know what's going on because my friends aren't super into it'.

## Conclusion

In this article we have inquired into the emotional dimension of consuming news during the first 10 months of President Donald Trump's administration. The account shows that asking participants to talk about their recent experiences with the news led many of them not only to talk about politics but also specifically discuss stories about President Trump. These experiences were usually shared with an overall sense of a heightened emotional response, and a significant level of attachment. The most common emotions that participants said to experience were anger, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed. Our analysis also suggests that negativity was sometimes tempered by the positive affect tied to relational benefits of being informed and to the fulfillment of their sense of civic duty. Nevertheless, avoidance, time reduction, or selectivity of their news consumption were different forms of self-preservation of participant's well-being.

Whenever the political issues shared by the participants felt, in their own accounts, more personal to them, their emotional experience was more intense. However, this did not necessarily make them disconnect from the news. While political communication and public opinion scholarship had expressed concern about citizen's apathy and a lack of engagement with the polity (Eliasoph, 1998; Pinkleton et al., 2012), and at times a distrust that new forms of media could counter this trend (White, 1997), our analysis shows that feelings such as anger were not translated into apathy but into engagement. This is consonant with previous scholarship that has argued that emotions that are sometimes conceived as negative do not necessarily lead to negative outcomes (Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) and can foster political activism and engagement (Gould, 2015; Wood, 2015). Furthermore, as feminist scholarship has argued, traditional notions of the liberal public sphere have often unattended issues of power differentials and inequality (Fraser, 1989; Mouffe, 2013). In this sense, our account contributes to understanding how power relationships can shape the emotional experience of groups for whom the polity and the public sphere is less welcoming, and how forms of political engagement can be developed in effective and sustainable ways for them.

Interviewees also indicated to experience a more intense emotional tonality when they encountered stories on social media than when they did so on traditional media outlets. This was usually tied to cross-ideological experiences that involved acquaintances and family, enabled by affordances such as sharing and commenting. While some interviewees said to avoid the emotional costs of exposure to cross-ideological content on social media, they also indicated to counterbalance this purposive isolation by consuming traditional out-partisan news media to see ‘what the other side is saying’. Even in the absence of this attitude, they referred to the impossibility of not being exposed to some degree of dissonance on social media. Moreover, the fact that platforms crosscut different social spheres of an individual’s world makes it hard to unfriend someone. Rosenberg (2004) has argued that in order to foster productive deliberation and public talk, emotional connections need to exist between participants. Moreover, Wahl-Jorgensen (2013a) argues that raising questions about how to generate a public sphere that produces feelings of empathy can contribute to making the public space more welcoming to consent and understanding (p. 19). That so many participants indicated experiencing the consumption of news on social media as a highly emotional experience, and that even when it was challenging they still wanted to ‘hear the other side’ to break their silos, signals that audiences themselves might be developing practices to cope with an emotionally charged and polarized environment.

Research has argued that populism creates an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ logic, and promotes ways of the leader to communicate directly with its ‘people’ (Waisbord, 2018). Our analysis suggests that the key is not that people respond primarily to President Trump’s direct communication on Twitter, but mostly to how the people who they personally know relate to that content and the media’s coverage. The perplexity with which people react to how their acquaintances experience populist rhetoric speaks of new ways in which populism is appropriated and recirculated among the public. An acknowledgment of that perplexity is what leads people to seek to break their silos: the desire of understanding ‘the other’ comes when that other is someone that is part of your life.

Our focus on emotions from an emic perspective complements the literature in political communication and public opinion that have understood emotions as discrete concepts that can be manipulated in experimental settings (Valentino et al., 2008; Weeks, 2015). Our ethnographic approach offers a messier but more realistic account, one also that underscores the importance of broad contextual factors and the common presence of conflict and contradiction in people’s lives. Moreover, reception studies have tended to highlight how situated practices enact structural factors – often looking at one factor at a time. Our focus on the emotional experience of news consumption adds a more holistic take on structural factors, showing how they coexist in people’s everyday experience, often leading to contradictions and triggering conflict. While a research stream on news and emotions has focused on understanding emotions as a feature of journalistic discourse (e.g. Duncan, 2012; Peters, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a), our study analyzes how audiences, and different groups, are themselves emotionally responding to encountering the news in a highly polarized political scenario.

More broadly, our findings suggest that the academic division of labor might not do justice to the ways in which these matters are incorporated into people’s everyday lives. To many of our interviewees, the political process, its rendition in the news media, and

their further circulation on social media were often experienced as tightly integrated and sometimes even indivisible concepts. Bringing an experiential perspective into conceptual development might entail rethinking the boundaries that have historically separated domains of inquiry or at least encouraging more fluid dialogues across these boundaries.

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## Note

1. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018) the population was 60.7 percent white, 18.1 percent Hispanic or Latinx, 13.4 percent is black or African American, 5.8 percent Asian, 1.3 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.2 percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific islander.

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